

Exodus 12: 1 – 4, 11 – 14
1 Corinthians 11: 23 – 26
John 13: 1 – 17, 31b – 35
Maundy Thursday, Yr A

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“A New Commandment”

One of the underlying images that shifts from the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament is the very image of God. In many ways, the God of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, is one of unimaginable power and a presence so fierce that mere mortals would die if they saw God face to face. This is the God of mighty works; the one who makes manna fall from heaven, who turns the Nile River into blood, who is pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. This is an awesome God, one that is not to be trifled with; a God greater than all other gods; one that will have no other god before God. Some of our psalms have been carefully edited in our worship services to leave out the references to bashing babies and slaughtering the enemies because it jars our sensibilities and our sensitivities. Our ancestors apparently liked their gods fierce and angry, filled with astonishing power, and willing to use it to benefit their followers.

How great this shift is becomes clear as we consider the image of God as depicted throughout the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament. It is true that God still will not be mocked and God's judgment is certain. God in Christ will come again, with power and great glory to judge the living and dead. But the face of God appears far more inviting, far less frightening. The New Testament God is shown, through the life and ministry of Christ Jesus, to be far more approachable and far more intimate. In Christ Jesus, we are called children of God and brothers and sisters in Christ. We are called into God's embrace and begged to be one with God. This is a God with whom we might sit at table and tell jokes and drink wine and laugh far into the night. This is a God with whom we might share our deepest secrets, our worst fears, our greatest hopes; which is a good thing since God knows them all anyway.

Our readings for this Maundy Thursday service of Holy Week lay out for us with great clarity this shift in God's image for us. The God of Exodus is a mighty God, one with powers over heaven and earth, one able to bring about life or death. This God is about to punish all of Egypt so as to bring God's people out of bondage and, eventually, into the Promised Land. This is a God concerned with proper form so the Israelites are given careful instructions about this act of release from slavery. It will involve a ritual meal, but this will be no festive banquet, filled with indolence and luxury. This will be a meal, served on the run, eaten hurriedly and without much ceremony. For death and destruction walk the land of Egypt this night; there will be much sorrow and many tears among the Pharaoh's people. But this is the message of God and the people of Israel hear and obey.

It is instructive that a meal is at the core of our readings from both the Gospel and Paul's Letter to the Corinthians. We recognize this meal instantly, for it has become part of our Sunday worship. Paul, that apostle untimely born, who was most clearly not at the Last

Supper, asserts that he, too, knows what Christ Jesus said to the disciples that night at table. While he does not get the words precisely right, it is clear that Paul knows not only what Jesus said, but also that Paul understands the theological meaning of those words of institution. This is our way of participating in the Last Supper, this is the way we can be with the apostles, gathered in community around a common table, sharing in a simple meal.

While our Gospel reading focuses on the washing of feet portion of the Last Supper, we know which meal this is. And what an intimate and emotionally powerful meal that was. Jesus knows, in this telling of the Gospel story, all of what is to come. We hear that sweeping, inclusive statement, “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” How many of us deeply wish to love and to be loved until the very end. And how does Jesus show the depth and power of his love? He washes their feet. Even today, washing an adult’s feet is socially awkward and difficult, mostly for the person receiving the washing. We are not used to having others kneel at our feet and wash any part of us. In ancient times, this was the work of the lowliest of slaves. Culturally, in a world of unpaved paths and sandals, the feet are the parts of people most likely to be marked by dirt and odor, the part of a person most often to be ritually unclean. Thus, for Jesus, the beloved rabbi and worker of many signs of great power, to kneel before his disciples and wash their feet during the meal is an act of almost unbearable affection, intimacy, and humility. And then Jesus, so typical of him to do so, turns his act of personal humility and affection into an order that the disciples ought to wash one another’s feet. And Jesus reminds them that, in God’s eyes, neither slaves nor masters are greater than the other. All are part of God’s creation and all have value in God’s eyes. Jesus concludes this demonstrated teaching with that second of the great two commandments and amplifies it by pointing out that Jesus loves them and, likewise, they should love one another.

This is no angry, vengeful God. This is a warm, intimate, loving God, yearning for all of creation to enter into close relationship. This is a calling forth based on mutual love; God’s love for us as shown in the life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ Jesus, given to us to show us the way that leads to life and peace. But Jesus also reminds his disciples and through them reminds us, that his sacrifice on the cross is not for us to emulate. We are not called to die on the cross. We are called to live, as best we may, into the way of Christ. We are called to love one another.

Tonight we will move from the warmth and companionship of a shared meal to the solemn act of preparing for Good Friday. Ritually, we will strip our sanctuary bare and empty out the symbols of our faith. Ritually, we will forget the end of the story so that we might enter more fully into the darkness that precedes the dawn. We will open our hearts and minds to the painful reality that death is real and harsh and ever present. We will wait as Jesus waited; we will wait as God waits even now. But we do this work in community; we do not face these hard times alone. We have shared this special meal; we have cared for one another; we have heard and we have believed that “mandatum,” that mandate from God that we should love one another. This is our day of remembrance. This is our night that is like no other night. This is our perpetual ordinance. But this

night we celebrate more than our Passover; we celebrate the overwhelming power of God's love and we rejoice in our calling to love one another as Christ loves us. By these acts, we pay our vows to the Lord, we lift our cup of salvation, and we return God's love by loving others. May it ever be so. Amen.